

Effective Technology for Effective Business

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Many businesses are becoming increasingly reliant on technology to underpin not only the running of their organisation, but also the achievement of their objectives. As more and more applications, and equipment to run them, are brought in to the business, all too often the needs of the business become subservient to the demands of the technology.

Technology should underpin, rather than drive, the business. Its usefulness is as a support tool, and it should not be an end in itself. Neither should the business drivers for the technology be allowed to ignore the operational impact of actually making it work.

Systems seem to change constantly, and new developments are announced with alarming frequency, all of which can mean that what started out as a simple office administration system has mushroomed in to a plethora of business-critical applications, which demand ever-increasing technical skills to keep them working. Over a period of years, the constant process of adding and upgrading can lead to systems being out of step with one another, and data becoming spread across a variety of locations. Changing practices, such as home-based working, introduce new demands for access to data.

Technological growth can not always be co-ordinated with that of the business, but the impact of this can be even more damaging when the support requirements begin to exceed the existing skill capabilities. When the business finds that the technology has taken over, and that its people require technical abilities far beyond the professional skills for which they were employed to do their job, then it is time to re-instate the business priorities.

How to break this pattern? The business needs must come first, and everyone in the business who has anything at all to do with the existing processes must be involved in the preparation of detailed business requirements that describe those needs, and their implementation. Any technological solution proposed to support those needs must be scrutinised closely for demonstration of how exactly it will support the requirements. Dissect potential solutions minutely, and see just how they match the requirements.

Consider the support requirements. The product may be capable of achieving what the business is looking for, but what will it take to make it work, and what is the ongoing support requirement?

How will implementation impact on the business, both in preparing to introduce it,

and then to make it work? What will be the impact on existing business processes? Will change be needed beyond the existing proposal? What will be the impact on capital investment? What will be the people impact? How will off-site people be supported? Supporting technology for off-site workers is quite different to meeting the needs of in-house people.

Do the costs justify proceeding?

Where outside developers are used, seek evidence at every stage that they have understood the business's requirements, and that the delivered product performs as expected, with no surprise burdens on resources.

Clean the data before using it in the new application. If the data is not valid and correctly formatted, this will get in the way of appraising the application's performance effectively.

Draw up a plan for user testing and acceptance, and get agreement before starting it. Make sure that everyone who will be using the new application is thoroughly trained before implementing it, with good reference documentation, and make ample opportunity for testing and feedback in a safe environment before running with live data.

Parallel running of new systems alongside existing processes is essential. An implementation plan must ensure that existing systems continue to be maintained, updated and used until there is absolute certainty that the new system is working correctly, and is producing the required results. Do not lose the safety net of being able to revert to existing systems in the event that expected results are not being achieved. Work the new system hard, pushing it to its maximum limits, and verify the results for a complete business cycle, before signing-off acceptance.

Post-implementation, seek feedback at all stages, and monitor the impact on people, processes and support. At the slightest divergence from expectations, identify the cause. If it can not be fixed, consider the significance and acceptability of its impact. Technology must not get in the way of the



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business. Even good technology can frustrate, unless it is prepared for and managed in the interests of the business. Tools should help the organisation to be more successful than it was before, or make it easier to get the work done, or ease pressure on resources, otherwise the expenditure is pointless. Technical competence that fails to address business issues is of no use to anyone.

Effective businesses need effective technology, but that is just one cog out of the many that need to work together to make a business successful.



Global Context Limited has been operating since 1998 as an independent consultancy supporting organisations coping with technology-driven change. For more information visit www.globalcontext.com.